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P. Shales, Tom
P. Buchwald, Art
Soc. 4.01. & Sheep on
the Runway

'Entertainment for a CIA Picnic'

Buchwald's Theatrical Show Dips to Crass Profiteering

By Tom Shales

Sentinel Drama Critic

Art Buchwald and Rod McKuen have at least one thing in common. They both know the formula for merchandising themselves. They each take a small, obscure talent and turn it into big, comfortable profits.

If Mr. Buchwald spent more than a week on his so-called play, "Sheep on the Runway," now at the National after a short New York run, then he wasted some of his time. Come to think of it, even one week may have been too much.

But ardent fans of Mr. Buchwald (who, for my money, has never been one-eighth as witty or keen as the New York Times' Russell Baker) will accept this play as they accept the Buchwald columns; a minimal effort expended for maximum returns to the author.

Not that there aren't laughs in this play. There are, as they say in the midwest, a parcel. Some of the lines have a good zing to them; some are commendably bitter. But the Buchwald brand of schoolboy satire simply can't support our attention for two acts and four scenes of what is supposed to

be a theatrical endeavor.

Not one of the characters in the play is anything but a cartoon drawing--and most of the lines are cartoon captions, a few of them swell--so a generally competent cast does all right by them. Martin Gabel seems particularly at home in his portrayal of Joseph Mayflower, journalist, demagogue and ass. Will MacKenzie is good, too, as the one figure in the plot with a shred of decency.

Burns Effective

But it is veteran David Burns who salvages the production with his bountifully broad, burlesque rendition of Ambassador Raymond Wilkins, part bumbling, all-thumbed diplomat, part bombastic father, and part--large part--baggy pants clown. Burns' double-takes are poetry, his grand stances comic intuition at large. He knows very well there isn't much

work with in the author's delineation of character, so he has a high time just being hilarious.

Others in the cast tend toward anonymity. Gene Saks' direction gives little momentum to an essentially immobile play. Peter Larkin's set makes no special comment of its own, though Jules Fisher's explosions and fireworks are nicely set off.

Buchwald says a lot of things in his play, as usual, that sound audacious but have a just-kidding-folks apologia about them, and you almost expect the play to end with a line like they used to use on TV to excuse what passed for satire there. Like this: "Well, we've had some fun here tonight at the expense of the government, but when all is said and done,

gee, they're a great bunch of guys, right?"

Too Glib

Then, too, Buchwald's farce about an eastern nation ruined by American self-service meddling seems a shade too glib when one considers the tragedy of its real-life counterpart. By making it all merely cute fun, Buchwald appears to minimize the outrage of reality. His mood and the play's attack probably would make it safe entertainment for a CIA picnic or a John Birch rally.

In that subtle way, "Sheep" dips lower than mediocrity to something less excusable, a kind of crass profiteering, essentially sycophantic and gutless. The play, in this light, becomes not just tedious, but hideous.